

The Seedbed Blog by Chase Franklin International Ministries



What I Learned About the Book of Ruth from Biblical Hebrew

During my time in seminary, I had the joy (or pain, depending on who you ask) of taking several semesters of [Biblical Hebrew](#). As a student, I encountered many who were either genuinely scared of learning the language or didn't see a point to it. These feelings are completely understandable. Learning a modern language (much less one that is a few thousand years old) can be a daunting task. Additionally, most pastors will dig into the Word and preach in their native language, not the original biblical languages. But, should these reasons keep someone from learning the biblical languages? Absolutely not!

After completing my Hebrew courses, I came away with a stronger passion not just for Biblical Hebrew itself but also for what it reveals about the Old Testament, especially the book of Ruth. Ruth is both one of the easiest books to read in Hebrew and yet the most [professionally written](#). While only four chapters long, there is so much meaning in the Hebrew that is lost in the various translations out today. Here are just a few of the smaller things I learned about Ruth from knowing Biblical Hebrew:

1) Elimelech and Naomi's "sojourning" in 1:1 was more than just fleeing a famine.

The word used for "sojourn" indicates a more permanent move with an intent to assimilate into the Moabite culture.

2.) The names of Elimelech and Naomi's sons, Mahlon and Chilion, likely meant "Sickly" and "Weakling."

As names were very indicative of the people named in the Old Testament, it's no wonder these two sons died young!

3.) The scene between Boaz and the foreman of his workers in Chapter 2 is actually very comical.

Most translations try to make proper sense of the foreman's response to Boaz's asking about Ruth, but the Hebrew indicates the foreman is actually stammering and struggling to respond. Put yourself in the foreman's position—how would you respond if your boss came and asked about a female worker nobody had seen before?

4.) In Boaz and Ruth's first conversation in 2:8-13, Ruth describes herself as a "foreigner."

This is actually a very gentle translation of this word which actually means at best "outsider" or at the worst "scum of the earth." Boaz goes on to describe the exact opposite of Ruth's own description. The Hebrew gives Boaz's actions towards Ruth much more meaning and casts Boaz's character in an even greater light.

5.) When Boaz encounters the kinsman redeemer in 4:1, Boaz calls him "friend."

The Hebrew would actually be better translated "So-and-so." This is quite possibly a slight by the writer against the kinsman redeemer. The kinsman redeemer passes on his obligation and would bring cultural shame against himself. As the [writer](#) was very careful to include names of the important characters in the book, the fact that the writer leaves this name out could be an indicator of that shame.